# Pagan Christian Churches

Over the past few years, I have been reading some of the trendy business strategy books that have been coming out. I'm not convinced it has been particularly useful, for other than Seth Godin there have been few, if any, that seemed to offer much in the way of advice that should be applied to a Christian ministry.

What has been alarming, though, is the number of case studies that came up about Christian churches. Yes, Christian churches that were being hailed as great examples for business leaders.

## Christian Churches as Business Case  Studies

For example, in *Made to Stick* by Chip Heath, Rick Warren's Saddleback Church is highlighted as a case study – specifically, their profiling of potential "customers" under the name of "Saddleback Sam" and "Saddleback Samantha." This case study has been cited over and over again in business books for its marketing genius. The profile of Sam and Samantha includes such details as education, income, job type ("professional, manager, or successful entrepreneur") number of kids, debt level, and so on. The church's marketing is then tailored to meet this profile "customer" to whom they evangelize.

In *Relaunch*, Mark Rutland writes about turning around troubled businesses and organizations. He describes the most valuable lessons of his early career from Dr. Paul Walker of Mount Paran Church. According to Rutland, Dr. Walker taught him valuable lessons in leadership. He gives the following examples:

- The first time Rutland went on stage at the church, Dr. Walker expressed concern that Rutland was not wearing his best dress shoes. Those were Rutland's only dress shoes, so Dr. Walker told him to get new ones. It was a requirement that a certain level of fashion be reflected in the church leadership.
- Dr. Walker insisted that professional titles, such as "Dr." were used. It was for the sake of the congregation, that their were confident in their leaders. "Mount Paran was a congregation of professionals who wanted their leaders to inspire confidence," summarizes Rutland.
- Rutland describes Dr. Walker's reputation from the point of view of area businessmen. One described Dr. Walker as "the best cash flow man in Atlanta." This had a profound effect on Rutland, who wrote, "I remember thinking, 'I want businessmen to talk about me that way. I want to be the kind of minister that buisnessmen respect professionally.'"

After leaving Mount Paran, Rutland was hired by Calvary Church in Florida, when the congregation was reeling from money and scandal problems. According to Rutland, the previous pastor was fired by the bank holding the note for the church, and they had final say in the hiring of Rutland as replacement. In the interview process, Rutland recalls that the bankers wanted an account of how he was going to turn things around, and without "any spiritual nonsense." Rutland writes about the situation, "The borrower, as the ancient words go, is slave to the lender."

Rutland threatened to move the congregation to a new building and default on the bank's controlling interest, but he did in fact turn the finances of the church around.

## God or Money

I have a hard time reconciling such a vision for Christian ministry with the Bible's instructions to faithful Christians. Christ told us to go out to all people, not just the urban professionals with white collar jobs. He did not send us forth, telling us to wear not only our best clothes, but the best clothes that are available.

Jesus and his apostles certainly do not seem to be on the same page as to where to find esteem. James writes, "Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Jesus warned that we cannot serve both God and mammon (wealth or money), as we will hate one and love the other. If your pastor is fired and hired by the bank that holds your mortgage, to which of the two are you beholden – or enslaved?

If, according to God, we are blessed when the world hates us and persecutes us, what does it mean if the world thinks we're the best cash-flow business in the region?

If King David and Israel were punished for a census, what is the fruit of evangelizing to a target demographic based on economic well-being?

At our churches, are we to be inspired by the Spirit of God, or the professional skills and fashion sense of our ministers?

## Pagan Christianity

Anything can become a false idol, and that even holds true for Christ himself. If your identity of Jesus and His message conflicts with the warnings, the nature of His ministry, and His commands so much as to put the esteem of the world before Him, then you are service a false image.

I mentioned Phil Vischer's description of the "Oprah god" before:  "We're drinking a cocktail that's a mix of the Protestant work ethic, the American dream, and the gospel. And we've intertwined them so completely that we can't tell them apart anymore. Our gospel has become a gospel of following your dreams and being good so God will make all your dreams come true. "

Mainstream Christianity in America is something other than Christianity. If we cannot serve both God and money, then we need to ask ourselves: who the hell have we been preaching, praising, and following?

*Photo Credit: Tricia on Flickr.*

Paul Nowak

Paul Nowak is a husband and father of 7, who also happens to be a writer and author. He has written *The Way of the Christian Samurai* among other books.

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